

Alizée Nolot

*A Taste of
Japan for
Christmas*



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*To Ana, thank you for this translation. Instagram brings about beautiful
friendships.*

November 29

“What?! This can’t be happening! The elevator was working just fine this morning!”

Heloise kept frantically pushing the button, but nothing happened. On the elevator’s digital screen, an unsettling red button appeared where the floor number should be. At that very moment, two girls, warmly wrapped in their puffy jackets with wool hats pulled low over their ears, came down the stairwell. They stopped where Heloise and her 2-meter-tall Christmas tree were leaning against the wall, waiting impatiently for the elevator to come down. The two stopped talking, and the tallest of the two teenagers looked at Heloise:

“Hey, the elevator hasn’t been working since this afternoon,” she said. “The maintenance company hasn’t come by yet, but they should be here soon. Good luck!”

Heloise thanked the two girls as they left the building, resuming their conversation.

She sighed, glancing at her phone, debating whether to call her associate for help. But after a few seconds, she decided not to sit around and wait: She took a deep breath as she braced herself – and the tree – and muttered to it as though it could hear her:

“Alright, big guy, here we go – seven flights of stairs. If I had known, I might’ve gotten a much smaller tree! Come on, one last effort after this crazy day at the shop!”

Fifteen minutes later, sweating and out of breath (despite taking breaks in between floors), Heloise finally made it. Her coat was covered in pine needles, and her arm muscles were burning, but the giant tree now proudly stood in the center of her studio. Getting it through the door was a tight squeeze, but somehow, the tree made it without a single branch breaking.

She took off her coat, struggling to shake off the pine needles that clung to it. Then, she took off her shoes, slipped into a pair of cozy, cushioned slippers, and headed to the bathroom to wash her hands. Once her hands were clean, she made

her way to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of white wine, and popped the cork with ease. She poured herself a generous glass, keeping it within arm's reach. Finally, she sank into her pull-out sofa with her well-earned drink in hand. She looked at her tree, a thoughtful expression on her face, and spoke aloud to it:

“You’re pretty big, huh? You’re not just super tall, but super wide too. I’m sure I won’t be able to fold my bed back for the whole month of December!”

Heloise’s place is well laid out for a small 30-square-meter apartment. With its open kitchen, a bar-style table separating it from the living room, and ample built-in closets that save her from needing extra furniture, it works. Still, the tree’s size has definitely taken up a lot of her living space. But who cares? Heloise loves Christmas so much that she can’t imagine not having a tree. As soon as they’re available for sale, she goes out to get one to kick off her favorite time of the year. She’d sleep on the floor if she had to!

“I’ll let you spread your branches while I make dinner, then I’ll decorate you with the finest ornaments!” she chirped.

Having only eaten a small sandwich for lunch, she decided to cook herself something more filling. She grabbed what she needed and quickly got to work on a classic carbonara dish. In just twenty minutes, she got a delicious plate of pasta, topped with a generous sprinkle of parmesan. Nothing like a good meal to get back on track! She devoured it eagerly, washing it down with a second glass of wine, all while thinking about how she wants to decorate her tree.

Once she finished her meal and cleaned up, Heloise decided it was time to kick off the holiday season: decorating her apartment for Christmas to help pass the time until the big day. For as long as she can remember, she’s eagerly awaited for Christmas to arrive, counting down the weeks in anticipation of everything she could do during her favorite month of the year – trying out new, indulgent recipes, wandering through stores to pick out the perfect ornaments for her tree, and spending hours thinking about what gifts to give her loved ones, making sure she picks something they’d truly love. Is there any better time of year than Christmas? It’s hard to beat. This year, with her chocolate shop, she may not have as much time to enjoy it.

Balancing on her step stool, Heloise pulled two boxes overflowing with decorations out from the top shelf of her closet. The weight of them took her by surprise, as she barely managed to steady herself. She’s collected a lot over the

years!

As she carefully opened the boxes, she felt a tug at her heart. She wished she could share this special time of year with someone close to her. She's had a few relationships, but none that lasted more than a few months.

At just 26, Heloise was already incredibly mature. She left home early, moving from the south of France to Paris to get a degree in Chocolate Making and Confectionery. She then honed her skills working with some of France's best chocolatiers. This year, she took the plunge and opened her own shop, partnering with David, a former coworker from her previous job. Compared to others her age – many of whom are still in school or living at home – she feels like she's living in a completely different world. Her most recent ex, for example, would leave his dirty socks all over her studio and always expected her to cook dinner. More specifically, he expected her to cook for him, since he was utterly incapable of making even a simple meal, like fried eggs! That had been a real turn-off for her. By the time that relationship ended, she had decided she'd rather be single and chose to focus on her career instead.

Lately, though, her solitude has started to weigh on her. Always fiercely independent, Heloise occasionally wished she had someone to share her day with when she got home. Someone who would give her a massage to unwind on Saturday night after a long week. Or simply someone to hold her hand during a Sunday walk in the woods. Simple things, but with the right person. Not with another manchild to look after!

Shaking herself out of that thought, Heloise reminded herself that she's still young. Right now, her focus is on making her hard work pay off by growing her business and finding success. Patrick Roger and Pierre Marcolini better watch out!

She swapped her jeans for leggings to be more comfortable and pulled her long brown hair into a high ponytail. With a silver garland around her neck and Mariah Carey blasting from her phone, Heloise is ready to turn her tree into the most beautiful tree of all. Colorful baubles and garlands; a gingerbread man she bought at the Strasbourg Christmas market; a bell with a cute little chalet inside that snows when you shake it, picked up at a famous decor store; a wooden reindeer she found at a flea market; a Nutcracker her parents gave her; a crocheted snowman made by a friend's mother. Heloise smiled with a mix of

gratitude and nostalgia as she remembered when each of these items came into her life. Forty-five minutes later, with both boxes emptied, she stepped back, satisfied.

“And now, the final touch!”

She plugged in the lights and switched off the overhead light. Sitting back, she was in awe of the sight. The blinking lights filled her studio with a warm, cozy glow. Her hazel eyes drifted over each ornament she placed. Whether it’s the details or the overall effect, she thought her tree was perfect. December started most beautifully.

It’s gorgeous! This will make a perfect wallpaper for my phone! She thought to herself.

Heloise quickly snapped a few photos of it from different angles. Once she was happy with the shot, she set it as her phone’s background. Then she sends the image to her family group chat, which includes her mom, Helen, her dad, Neil, and herself. Her mom’s response was almost immediate. She knew her daughter well and was probably expecting the traditional tree photo any minute.

“You’ve outdone yourself, sweetie! Your tree is even more beautiful than last year’s!” she wrote, followed by a string of heart-eye, Christmas tree, and gift emojis. Five minutes later, her dad sent a simple thumbs-up, but Heloise knew he thought just as much of it.

Heloise and her mom exchange messages to catch up, since they won’t see each other until the New Year. Her parents, both newly retired, decided on a whim to head to Mauritius for the holidays. Ever since Heloise moved to Paris for her studies and lived with her mom’s sister, Mireille, her parents had made a vow to see each other for Christmas. But now that Heloise has grown up and has a time-consuming business, it’s hard to take time off to be with them. No days off during this time of year! They planned to make up for it in January, when Heloise will take ten days off to relax. She’ll join them at their family home. She tells herself it’s a good thing – more time to extend the festive spirit and the Christmas cheer.

She drifted into her childhood memories, recalling when she eagerly waited for her dad to come home with the Christmas tree. The excitement she felt when he walked through the door, arms full of the tree, and set it down in the middle

of their spacious living room. Back then, there was no need to worry about the tree's size. They'd spend every Saturday afternoon decorating the tree together, snacking on cookies, and sipping hot chocolate. Heloise fondly remembered Christmas Eve. Her grandparents would take her upstairs to her bedroom, keeping her busy while her parents secretly set up the gifts under the tree. And when she came down, she'd gasp in wonder as she saw what Santa had brought:

“Santa came!”

She would then carefully inspect each gift, wrapped in colorful paper, reading the names written on them. Then, with the utmost seriousness, she'd take on the task of handing out presents to the family. Finally, trembling with excitement, she'd pick out the first gift from her huge pile and unwrap it carefully, trying not to tear the paper. As an only child, she had always been spoiled. Every year, she was pleased to find that Santa had honored her list just as she'd written it – meticulously, in her best handwriting, with the toy catalog page numbers included to make sure he didn't make any mistakes.

With these happy memories filling her mind, Heloise set her alarm for 6 a.m. the next day. No rest for chocolatiers on the weekend – especially during the busy holiday season ahead. She climbed into bed with her heart full of gratitude.

Christmas is almost here!

November 30

6 a.m. The alarm went off to the sound of Elvis Presley's Blue Christmas.

Heloise stretched, rubbed her eyes, and let out a long yawn. The very first thing she saw when she finally opened them was her Christmas tree. A smile instantly spread across her face. But there's no time to linger – holiday season means chocolate season, and there's work to be done! Alongside Easter, Christmas is the busiest, most important time of year – almost half the year's sales depend on these few weeks. And this year is extra special: it's her very first Christmas in her own shop. She wanted it to be perfect – worthy of both her dreams and the hours she's poured into making them a reality.

She threw on her coat, hopped in the car, and drove the short ten minutes to Meufly, a quaint little town on the edge of Paris. The bustling main street and nearby train stop make it an easy destination for customers. She hadn't hesitated long when she'd spotted the "for lease" sign in the window months ago. She and David visited the space the very next day, and everything fell into place from there.

She paused in front of the lilac storefront, her chest swelling with pride. It wasn't the usual safe palette of browns and oranges – and that was precisely the point. The color alone made the shop stand out, and the theme ran through their gift boxes, shopping bags, and business cards. Above the door, "Chocolaterie HD" gleamed in elegant lettering. The name contained a subtle pun: while some read it as "Chocolaterie High Definition," locals quickly realized it was also the initials of its two founders, Heloise and David.

She slipped in through the back entrance that leads through a little courtyard and into their office-slash-changing room. From there, she stepped into the shop.

"Morning, David! How are you? Not too tired from yesterday's long day?"

He was already in the workshop, busy at his station. He took a brief pause to kiss Heloise's cheek before she teased him about his scruffy beard.

"Ha, ha, laugh all you want. I'm fine. Already working on the raspberry ganache. And you? Did you get your tree up?"